

# Eric Robertson

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Citizenship: USA

## Education

|   |                        |
|---|------------------------|
| PhD Candidate, Economics, University of Virginia                                    | May 2026 (expected)    |
| <i>Committee: Sheetal Sekhri, Sandip Sukhtankar, Kerem Coşar, Gaurav Chiplunkar</i> |                        |
| Visiting Research Student, London School of Economics and Political Science         | Fall 2023, Spring 2024 |
| MA in Economics, University of Virginia   | December 2021          |
| BA in Economics & Mathematics, University of Virginia                               | May 2017               |

## Fields of Interest

Primary: Development Economics  
Secondary: Political Economy, Environmental Economics, Economic History

## Job Market Paper

“Economic Ideas and Policy Implementation: Evidence from Malthusian Training in British Indian Bureaucracy”

Abstract: Public servants frequently fail to implement government policy as intended by principals. I investigate how exposure to economic ideas can alter implementation by government agents, focusing on the influence of Malthusian ideas on British bureaucrats in colonial India. In the Malthusian view, economic distress reduces population growth, raising incomes and ultimately resolving distress without any need for government intervention. Leveraging the death of Malthus in 1834 as a natural experiment, I find that colonial officials who studied under Malthus at a bureaucratic training college implemented less generous fiscal policies in response to rainfall shortages, a proxy for local distress. Across every common relief measure, Malthus-trained officials provided between 0.10 and 0.25 SD less relief than peers trained by Richard Jones, a critic of Malthus. The results offer new evidence concerning how economic ideas shape government policy through their influence on bureaucrats.

## Working Papers

“The Salt Shock: Scarcity, Substitution, and Surprising Health Spillovers”  
(with Sheetal Sekhri, Ramiro Burga, and Sisir Debnath)

Abstract: We study the long-run health impacts of a 19th-century colonial tax that sharply altered salt prices across a fiscal border in British India. To enforce the salt tax, the British built a 2,500-mile customs line, the salt hedge, which raised salt prices and limited access in eastern regions for several decades. Using a spatial regression discontinuity design around the historical hedge, we show that individuals east of the hedge, who faced prolonged exposure to salt scarcity, exhibit lower rates of hypertension and heart disease today. Historical archival records confirm sustained salt price gaps during the hedge’s operation (1836–1879), and contemporary consumption data reveal persistent differences in salt use across regions. Our results uncover a surprising health spillover from an extractive institution, driven by persistent behavioral adaptation in consumption. We highlight a novel pathway through which fiscal policies can leave a long-lasting imprint on health, even after the policy itself has abolished.

“Consequences of Elevated Fluoride Exposure for Cognitive Development ”  
(with Sheetal Sekhri, Ryan Brown, Amzad Hossain, Emily Gonzalez, and Rajiv Gupta)

**Abstract:** We establish causal links between elevated fluoride exposure in drinking water and the cognition and health of children by leveraging local geogenic factors that generate fluoride variation in household-level drinking water. We consistently find that elevated exposure generates an 8-10% deficit in the general intelligence of children. In addition, the children exposed to high levels of fluoride in their drinking water also have less human capital accumulation, as measured by math and language proficiency tests, worse dental health, and suffer from important physical limitations. We conclude that environmental exposure to elevated fluoride leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty: exposure affects children's cognition and health, leading to adverse inter-generational consequences, depressing economic mobility, and perpetuating inequality.

### **Work in Progress**

- “Competitive Selection and Bureaucrat Performance: Evidence from the end of Patronage in British India”  
“The Long Run Health Consequences of Early-Life Exposure to Fluoride: Evidence from Mexico”  
(with Sheetal Sekhri)

### **Presentations**

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| Washington Area Development Economics Symposium, Washington, DC | April 2025 |
| LSE Graduate Economic History Seminar, London, UK               | May 2024   |

### **Teaching Experience**

Teaching assistant, UVA:

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| <i>Environmental Economics (undergraduate)</i>                         | Spring 2025       |
| <i>Economics of the Environment and Sustainability (undergraduate)</i> | Fall 2024         |
| <i>Principles of Economics: Macroeconomics (undergraduate)</i>         | Summer 2023       |
| <i>Behavioral Finance (undergraduate)</i>                              | Spring 2022, 2023 |
| <i>Theory of Financial Markets (undergraduate)</i>                     | Fall 2021, 2022   |

### **Fellowships and Awards**

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|---|------|
| Bankard Fund for Political Economy Pre-Doctoral Fellowship      | 2025 |
| Quantitative Collaborative Bynum Grant                          | 2024 |
| Dumas Malone Graduate Research Fellowship                       | 2023 |
| Tipton R. Snavely Fund Prize for the Best Dissertation Proposal | 2023 |

### **Research and Other Activities**

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| Student organizer, Bankard Workshop in Development Economics, University of Virginia | 2024-2025 |
| Quantitative Collaborative Graduate Student Affiliate                                | 2023-2025 |
| Research Assistant to Professor Sandip Sukhtankar, University of Virginia            | 2019-2020 |
| Research Assistant to Professor Sheetal Sekhri, University of Virginia               | 2017-2019 |

### **Professional Service**

Referee for *Journal of Public Economics*, *Journal of Law and Economics*, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*

### **References**

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|---|---|--|
| Sheetal Sekhri<br>Professor<br>Dept. of Economics<br>University of Virginia<br>ssekhri@virginia.edu | Sandip Sukhtankar<br>Professor<br>Dept. of Economics<br>University of Virginia<br>srs8yk@virginia.edu | Kerem Coşar<br>Professor<br>Dept. of Economics<br>University of Virginia<br>kerem.cosar@virginia.edu |
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